

Assessing the Interpersonal Conflict-Handling Behaviour of Young Adults

Shailesh Bhagat, Dr. Nirmala Singh Rathore and Prakriti Sushmita

NIMS Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIMS University, Jaipur

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted on a sample of 60 college going students from Jaipur, India, to assess their interpersonal conflict-handling behaviour in day-to-day life. The study used the Thoms-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument which measures behaviour on five Modes i.e. competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Responses were statistically analysed to find out the most and least preferred conflict-handling styles amongst participants and to see if any gender differences exist. The results obtained were also compared with previous studies which have been mostly performed on western population, to see if the Indian composition of the sample group brings any noticeable difference to the already existing findings. The key findings of this research show 'Avoiding' and 'Accommodating' style as the most preferred style of handling interpersonal-conflicts in participants which indicates a passive and unassertive approach to handling conflicts. Some gender differences were also revealed but they were not found statistically significant.

Keywords: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, accommodating

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Conflicts are an inseparable part of our lives. In various situations, at various times we must deal with conflicts with various people. Conflicts can be of different types like interpersonal conflicts, intrapersonal conflicts, organizational conflicts, community conflicts, etc. Kurt Lewin, a German-American psychologist famously described the three most well-known types of conflicts, namely, approach-approach conflict: a situation involving a choice between two equally desirable but incompatible alternatives, approach-avoidance conflict: arises when a goal has both positive and negative aspects, and thus leads to

approach and avoidance reactions at the same time, and avoidance-avoidance conflict: a situation involving a choice between two equally objectionable alternatives (Sharma, 2015).

There can be several different causes for interpersonal conflict, like different points of view, personality mismatches, different styles of communication, cultural differences, diverse upbringings, different perceptions, unpredictable events or conflicting values and beliefs.

People can have different ways of dealing with conflicts. Some people are more reactive than others while some are more patient. Some like to take a break mid-conflict to prevent the conflict from escalating while some like to break things to calm themselves down and some just prefer to avoid conflicts altogether. Some are more dominating in conflicts by nature or as a learned behaviour and some more submissive.

The word "conflict" can have a very broad range of meaning in the general sense but for the purpose of our research we have chosen interpersonal conflict as the focus of our study. Here, by interpersonal conflict we simply mean any situation where interests of one person differ from those of another, thus creating a situation of conflict. This research uses the famous Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) which is a well-established measure of conflict handling behaviour in organizational settings developed by Ralph H Kilmann and Kenneth W. Thomas in 1974. Thomas and Kilmann have described two dimensions of human behaviour in dealing with conflicts: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness refers to the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns in conflict situations. Cooperativeness refers to the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns in situations of conflict. Based on these two dimensions Thomas and Kilmann have created 5 Modes: Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and

Accommodating. The TKI test measures conflict-handling behaviour on these 5 modes (Motwani, n.d.).

The 5 TKI Modes

Competing

Competing is assertive and uncooperative; individuals who use this mode try to satisfy their own concerns at the other person's expense.

Collaborating

Collaborating is assertive and cooperative; individuals who use this mode try to find a win-win solution that completely satisfies both persons' concerns.

Compromising

Compromising is intermediate in assertiveness and cooperativeness; individuals who use this mode try to find an acceptable settlement that only partially satisfies both persons' concerns.

Avoiding

Avoiding is unassertive and uncooperative; individuals who use this mode sidestep the conflict without trying to satisfy either person's concerns.

Accommodating

Accommodating is unassertive and cooperative; individuals who use this mode attempt to satisfy the other person's concerns at the expense of their own.

Methods

Participants

A sample of 60 participants consisting of 30 males and 30 females was chosen from amongst college going students aged between 18 and 26 years. On an open invitation to the undergraduate and postgraduate students, participants came to fill out the offline questionnaire i.e. the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, after college hours.

Measures

This research uses the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). It is a well-established measure of conflict handling behaviour. There are 30 forced choice items on this scale. Each item asks participants to choose one of two

statements which describes their existing or most likely behaviour in situations of conflict. For example, one pairing is between "I am usually firm in pursuing my goals" (competing) and "I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship" (accommodating). Another is between "I consistently seek other's help in working out a solution" (collaborating) and "I try to do what is necessary to avoid useless tensions" (avoiding). The test measures the participant's responses on 5 modes: Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating. Each mode is paired with the other modes three times, so that scores on each mode ranges from 0 to 12 and the total sum of all 5 modes is fixed at 30. Kilmann and Thomas (1977) reported four-week test-retest reliabilities as follows: competing 0.61, collaborating 0.63, compromising 0.66; avoiding 0.68, and accommodating 0.62.

Procedure

A questionnaire survey method was used in this research to gather data about people's conflict handling behaviour using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. The survey was conducted in an offline mode i.e. the participants physically filled out the questionnaires. All students who participated were assured confidentiality and they provided informed consent for the same. Age, gender, family type and number of siblings were kept as the independent variables in this study and the 5 TKI modes (competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating) formed the dependent variable. To analyse the sample data the raw scores were put in the SPSS software and important measures were obtained like mean, frequency, Standard Deviation, t-test, Pearson correlation coefficient.

RESULTS

The participants were scored out of 12 on each of the five conflict handling modes and a mean score for each mode was calculated: competing (5.17), collaborating (5.30), compromising (5.18), avoiding (6.80) and accommodating (7.55). The participants scored the highest in Accommodating followed by Avoiding. Table 1 shows the mean, minimum score, maximum score, and standard deviation for each of the 5 modes.

Table 1

Minimum Score, Maximum Score, Mean and Standard Deviation for the Five Modes

Modes	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	M	SD
Competing	1	10	5.17	2.23
Collaborating	1	9	5.30	1.84
Compromising	1	10	5.18	2.28
Avoiding	2	10	6.80	1.63
Accommodating	4	12	7.55	2.14

A gender analysis reveals slight differences in the mean scores of males and females where males scored higher in competing, compromising, and avoiding while the females scored higher in

collaborating and accommodating (see Table 2). However, the differences were not found statistically significant in any of the five conflict modes.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation for the Five Modes by Gender, and T Test

Modes	Male		Female		df	t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
Competing	5.30	2.25	5.03	2.24	58	-0.46	.65	0.12
Collaborating	5.17	1.84	5.43	1.87	58	0.56	.58	0.14
Compromising	5.40	2.44	4.97	2.13	58	-0.73	.47	0.19
Avoiding	7.03	1.19	6.57	1.98	47.54	-1.11	.27	0.28
Accommodating	7.10	1.97	8.00	2.23	58	1.66	.10	0.43

Note. Table 2 reveals non-significant mean differences between gender for the 5 modes (at .05 significance level) with $p > .05$ for all conflict modes. The effect size is small for all modes.

The participants' preference for conflict handling style was also calculated based on the frequency of highest and lowest scores in the 5 conflict modes. In the male group, on average 50% participants scored the highest in Accommodating thus indicating it as their most preferred style in

situations of conflict while 45% males scored the lowest in Competing, indicating it as their least preferred conflict handling style. The females were even more accommodating with 56.67% choosing 'Accommodating' mode as their most dominant conflict handling style. The least preferred amongst females was a tie between 'Competing' and 'Compromising' mode with 43% females in each group scoring the lowest.

Table 3

Mode Preference Among Participants Based on Percentage Frequency of Highest and Lowest Scored Modes

Modes	Male		Female		Total	
	Chosen as Most Preferred (%)	Chosen as Least Preferred (%)	Chosen as Most Preferred (%)	Chosen as Least Preferred (%)	Chosen as Most Preferred (%)	Chosen as Least Preferred (%)
Competing	13.33	46.67	10	43.33	11.67	45
Collaborating	10	33.33	10	16.67	10	25
Compromising	23.33	36.67	13.33	43.33	18.33	40
Avoiding	36.67	0	23.33	13.33	30	6.67
Accommodating	50	16.67	56.67	10	53.33	13.33

The scores on the five TKI modes were correlated with the number of siblings of the participants for each corresponding score. In the female group a significant positive correlation was found between number of siblings and competing mode, $r(28) = .53, p = .003$. There was a negative significant correlation between number of siblings and compromising mode, $r(28) = -.45, p = .013$ (see

Table 4). The other modes i.e. collaborating showed non-significant positive correlation, and avoiding and accommodating showed a non-significant negative correlation with the 'number of siblings' variable. Amongst males, there were no significant correlations found. However, at non-significant level competing and accommodating modes were negatively correlated while collaborating,

compromising and avoiding showed a positive direction in correlation.

Table 4

Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Number of Siblings, Competing Mode, and Compromising Mode

Variables	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.
1. Number of siblings	1.67	1.24	-		
2. Competing	5.03	2.24	.53**	-	
3. Compromising	4.97	2.13	-.45*	-.56**	-

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Correlation between 'Competing' and 'Compromising' mode cannot be established due to their non-independent and ipsative nature.

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to understand and analyse the conflict handling behaviour of young adults. For this a sample of 30 males and 30 females was selected from college going undergraduate and postgraduate students. The famous Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument was used to conduct an offline survey. The questionnaire instrument was developed by Thomas and Kilmann in 1974 which assesses conflict handling behaviour of individuals in terms of 5 modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. The results of the research showed Accommodating (mean 7.55) to be the most preferred style of handling interpersonal conflicts in the youth followed by Avoiding (mean 6.80). Since these modes lie in the 'cooperative, non-assertive' and 'non-cooperative, non-assertive' dimension respectively, what this means is that the participants in the sample group prefer to have a relatively passive attitude in situations of conflict. Their usual behaviour in conflicts is to either sidestep entirely from conflicts or to give more importance to the other's interest in disagreement than to one's own. The forced choice design and ipsative nature of the test makes the scores on the five scales non-independent as they sum to a constant 30. Due to this, measures like t-test or ANOVA could not be performed to analyse inter-mode relationship.

However, a descriptive statistic and t-test analysis was run on gender for each of the 5 modes. Males scored slightly higher in Competing, Compromising, and Avoiding with a mean difference of 0.267, 0.433, and 0.467 respectively. Females on the other hand scored higher in Collaborating and Accommodating with a mean difference of 0.267 and 0.900 respectively. None of these differences however were found statistically significant which leads to the inference that males

and females performed more or less same on the test and any differences found perhaps could be due to chance.

On comparing these results with the original developers Thomas and Kilmann's findings we see that they found males to be outperforming females in the competing mode with statistical significance. Herk, Thompson, Thomas, and Kilmann (2011) found that international samples followed a similar pattern when completing the North American English version of the TKI, with 10 out of 17 countries having men scoring higher on Competing. Gender differences on other modes were less evident.

One possible explanation for why such difference in the competing mode could not be found in our data could be due to a cultural factor. In individualistic cultures, people are considered "good" if they are strong, self-reliant, assertive, and independent. This contrasts with collectivist cultures where characteristics like being self-sacrificing, dependable, generous, and helpful to others are of greater importance. It could perhaps be due to this reason that the dominant conflict handling styles found were of non-assertive and accommodating nature.

Moreover, the scores on the five TKI modes were correlated with the number of siblings of the participants for each corresponding score. In the female group, the 'number of siblings' variable positively correlated with the competing mode at .01 level of significance and negatively correlated with the 'compromising' mode at .05 level of significance. The inference from these correlations appears to suggest that those females who have a greater number of siblings in their family also happened to score relatively higher in competing style of conflict-handling behaviour and simultaneously lower in compromising style of conflict-handling behaviour. However, since correlation merely shows a simultaneous appearance of two scores in a certain direction and not any causation, these results are to be interpreted with caution. In the male group no significant correlation was found.

Additionally, there was one more variable that was recorded in the data collection process i.e. the 'family type' variable. The participants were asked what type of family they belonged to (i.e. single-parent household, nuclear family or extended/joint family) but the data received was too skewed to conduct any statistical analysis on it. Therefore, the 'family type' variable had to be removed from the study.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can say that solely based on mean scores we have found 'Accommodating' followed by 'Avoiding' to be the most preferred conflicting-handling style in young adults. What this means is that the participants most often prefer to either avoid conflicts entirely or give more importance to other's interests even sometimes over their own interests.

The most important implication of this research is that most of the other studies that have been done in this area were performed in the western part of the world. There has been relatively less research done in the eastern side and even lesser in the Indian subcontinent. This research is a step up in that direction. There is certainly room for more research in this area. Future studies could perhaps improve upon some of the limitations of this research (like increasing the age range, choosing a bigger and diverse sample group, including more measure variables) and produce results that are comparable or contrasting to our findings and we could collectively gain more insight on human-conflict handling behaviour.

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